

## A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS WITH HENRY LAURENS

C. JAMES TAYLOR\*

WHILE THIS YEAR IS A MAJOR ANNIVERSARY FOR THE SOUTH Carolina Historical Society, it is also a minor milestone in my relationship with the institution. Twenty-five years ago in 1980, George Rogers introduced me to Gene Waddell, then director of the Historical Society, and the remarkable collection of Laurens family papers that have been at the society since it opened.<sup>1</sup> During the intervening years, I have visited the Fireproof Building many times—usually seeking more information about Henry Laurens and his family. I do not visit as often as I did when Laurens was my primary research topic. Soon after I moved to Boston and joined the staff at the Massachusetts Historical Society, I recognized that I have been privileged to work at two of the finest institutions of the type in the nation. Both of these historical societies have remarkable traditions, unique and priceless holdings, dedicated staffs, and similar missions.<sup>2</sup> There are no more historically significant cities in America than Boston and Charleston, and each is enriched by the presence of these institutions.

The twenty-five years I have spent studying Laurens may be clearly divided into two periods. The first twenty-three years I worked closely on a daily basis with documents, mostly letters written to or from him. I devoted that large portion of my career to organizing Laurens documents and the primary and secondary materials essential to understanding them. I labored, with George Rogers, David Chesnutt, Peggy Clark, and many other editors who came and went over the years, to produce research

\* C. James Taylor is editor in chief of *The Adams Papers* at the Massachusetts Historical Society. He is former project director of *The Papers of Henry Laurens*.

<sup>1</sup> The South Carolina Historical Society's first publication printed Professor F. A. Porcher's "Address Pronounced at the Inauguration of the South-Carolina Historical Society" and followed it with a document from the institution's "foremost" collection. The inclusion of "A Narrative of the Capture of Henry Laurens" demonstrated the society's recognition of the significance of their collection of Laurens papers. *Collections of the Historical Society of South Carolina, Volume One* (Charleston, S.C.: S. G. Courtenay & Co., 1857): 1-17, 18-83.

<sup>2</sup> The South Carolina Historical Society's mission as originally stated is "to collect information respecting every portion of our State, to preserve it, and when deemed advisable to publish it." The Massachusetts Historical Society's concept of its purpose, found in the preamble to its original constitution, has remained unchanged since its 1791 founding: "the preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts and records . . . to rescue the true history of this country from the ravages of time and the effects of ignorance and neglect."

material that would become the building blocks for numerous other peoples' scholarly papers, articles, and monographs.

This was generally satisfying and rewarding work that helped to complete the sixteen-volume edition that has been widely employed, heavily cited, and always favorably reviewed by historians interested in the many topics associated with Laurens's life and career.<sup>3</sup> Documentary editions such as the Laurens Papers are first and above all research tools. They must be as accurate, clear, and faithful to the original documents as possible. The supporting annotation likewise should only help identify terms, events, or people in the documents. As historical editors, we may and often do have special insights because of the mastery of the documents and the information needed to present them in an accurate and meaningful context. Interpretation, however, is left to the scholars who use the materials that we labor to produce. This type of work necessitates a narrow and dedicated focus. We are in some ways more like the medieval monks who painstakingly labored to preserve texts by years of faithful work in the scriptorium—performing significant but often-anonymous work.

What is ultimately most satisfying is the fact that the edited documents have a much longer shelf life than most of the biographies and monographs that become dated as the interpretive winds change. A century from now, the Laurens Papers volumes will be mined for information just as they are today. In the many years of slow but steady production, both at the Laurens and Adams Papers, I have been buoyed by the very simple and accurate aphorism of nineteenth-century French historian Fustel de Coulanges that remains true today, and I suspect always will: "No documents, no history!" Thankfully, institutions like the South Carolina Historical Society have preserved the documents that will assure future generations the opportunity to rewrite history to meet the interpretative needs of their age.

Although documentary editors avoid making obvious interpretations in their volumes, they do provide subtle but significant interpretation by deciding what to include in the printed volumes—which is all that most people ever see of the entire collection. For example, the last five volumes of *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, covering the years 1777 to 1792, printed less than one quarter of the extant documents.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the index, the door

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Weir, in his review of the last volume, summarized the forty-year effort as "one of the great editorial projects of our time. Henry Laurens, in the words of early biographer David Duncan Wallace, was a giant, and his published *Papers* are a fitting monument." *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 105 (January 2004): 52-54. See also Dorothy Twohig, "Reluctant Revolutionary: The Papers of Henry Laurens," *Documentary Editing* 26 (Fall 2004): 167-174.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Hamer, the first editor of the Laurens Papers, anticipated between ten and twelve volumes to complete the edition. As the number of volumes crept toward twelve in the late 1980s, the editors realized that several more would be

through which most scholars enter the material, is the editor's interpretation of how to access the information in the volumes. Still, despite these occasional forays into the heady realm of interpretation, most of my energies, like those of my fellow editors during that twenty-three-year stint at the University of South Carolina, were devoted to the minutiae of the documents—trying to understand not only what was written, but why and how the individual letter, note, or scrap fit into the entire corpus. And finally, I must determine the best method of reproducing the item in an accurate and usable form for other people to employ.

Yet one continuing frustration is that the information packed into the sixteen volumes of the Laurens Papers has been employed in a piecemeal way. The Laurens Papers are a rich source for investigations into transatlantic commerce, rice cultivation and trade, frontier development, South Carolina's revolutionary politics, and scores of other topics—not the least of which is the broad and consuming issue of slavery and the slave trade. Few studies have focused on the man himself, however, unless for some particular issue or narrow aspect of his life. I am not complaining. It is good that the edition is so frequently cited, and I hope as time goes by that the personality, character, and the man will emerge from works based on the Papers.

This is why I now have a new relationship with Henry Laurens, one that has evolved over the last two years. After two decades of helping to prepare the way for other scholars to mine the treasure that is the Laurens Papers, now I will use the documents to help understand the man and the era. After years of restraint, I am not only able but also expected to interpret his life and career. I have cared for the trees long enough and am presently in the process of stepping back to examine the whole forest.

Despite my current affiliation with John and Abigail Adams and the numerous members of that famous clan, I am on constant alert for any reference to Henry Laurens. My fellow editors at the Adams Papers tease me that somehow I always find a way to interject Laurens into our discussions about the founding generation. (They seem to think that John Adams is a more significant historical figure than Laurens!) In fact, two of the new assistant editors were unfamiliar with the name "Henry Laurens" when they joined the staff. Of course, they are not anymore; I have cured them of this shortcoming.

Recently the entire Adams Papers editorial staff made a pilgrimage to the Adams National Historic Park in Quincy, Massachusetts. I had not been

needed to publish even half of the documents for the remaining years of Laurens's life. The limited resources of the edition's primary source of funding, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, necessitated a rigorous selection policy that resulted in only one quarter of the extant documents being printed in the last five volumes.

there for several years, and for some of our group, it was their first visit. Because the site was closed for the season, we had a very special tour from a senior park-service guide who has been at the site for her entire career. She knew the house and all of its material culture as well as anyone and proudly informed us that everything in the house belonged to the Adams family. The portraits hung there are of members of the family, with a few exceptions. Prominently displayed on the first floor are likenesses of George and Martha Washington and a handsome portrait of Lafayette. As we toured the upstairs and peered into John Adams's office (the room that he actually lived in during his declining years and where he died), I noticed an engraving of John Singleton Copley's 1782 portrait of Henry Laurens. This engraving by Valentine Green was reproduced and sold by London printer John Stockdale beginning in October 1782. Both Adams and Laurens purchased books and pamphlets from Stockdale, and in fact, both at one time or another rented apartments from him.<sup>5</sup> But what is significant about this engraving, and I think may have underscored my case for Laurens as a respected member of the founding generation with the other Adams editors, is the fact that no one but John Adams would have brought that likeness into the house, and it would not have been placed there unless Adams believed the man depicted in it was worthy of the honor.<sup>6</sup>

Now that I have invested some time studying these two founding fathers and reading their mail, I see some striking similarities. Both John Adams and Henry Laurens were assertive, critical men who, depending on your politics or perspective, could be described as steadfast or stubborn, resolute or inflexible. They had what I am sure Adams considered a minor tiff in 1783. Laurens, on the other hand, revealed in this incident what was perhaps one of his greatest personal flaws: his inability to overlook small and often insignificant personal slights. I am sure that John Adams would have been shocked to know that the man whose likeness he kept in a position of honor in his home wrote in his journal that John Adams "was the malicious contriver" who had intrigued against him during the final stages of the peace negotiations in order to exclude his name from the definitive

<sup>5</sup> There is a new study of John Stockdale and his relationship with American revolutionary leaders such as Adams and Laurens. See Eric Stockdale, *'Tis Treason My Good Man!: Four Revolutionary Presidents and a Piccadilly Bookshop* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Wilhelmina S. Harris, the superintendent of the Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts, prepared a report in the late 1960s on the furnishings in the "Old House." In volume 4, page 388, is her following comment on the engraving: "In the summer of 1965 a young man by the name of Dunlap visited the Old House and said he was a descendant of Laurens. He also told the writer that the ring which Laurens has on his left hand is now held by the Laurens family trust and made available to the men on such occasions as their wedding."

Treaty of Paris signed in September 1783.<sup>7</sup> I do not believe Adams attempted to keep Laurens from the honor of having his name affixed to the famous document. In fact, I doubt that he cared one way or another, but given a choice, would have had Laurens sign. Both Adams and Laurens preserved their papers for their own records, but also because they knew that later generations of historians would write the story of the Revolution from these documents. The comments they made about other personalities of the age sometimes may have been written in haste, anger, or without the proper reflection, but they remain part of the record. I will return to this strange, but I think revealing, chapter in the Laurens-Adams relationship at the end of this paper.

What I wish to do now is look at a few events in Laurens's life. These events—some significant, others not—I believe are illustrative of the best and worst of the man. Considered together, they provide a capsule biography that begins to reveal the character of the revolutionary leader. None of us travels in a straight line through life. We make critical decisions about education, family, and career, but just as often, fate or chance intervenes to put us on a new and totally unsuspected course. And so it was for Laurens. The more I have read and unearthed about him, the more I have realized that despite the fact that several thousand letters to and from him are extant, it is impossible to create a full portrait of the man. The standard cradle-to-grave biography that follows the figure's life interpreting or explaining the influence of family, education, and surroundings will only tell part of the story, and I fear far from a complete or satisfying one. What sets Laurens apart and really defines him is the way he responded to the dramatic changes that took place over which he had little control. In most cases, he accepted the alterations in the trajectory of his life and used them to improve his situation and that of his family, state, and nation. Early in life he adopted the motto "Whatever is, is best." He chose his motto wisely, and I know often repeated it to himself as well as others as a consolation.<sup>8</sup>

The disconcerting thing about Henry Laurens is that while he weathered the most jarring changes and reverses of fortune, small and relatively

<sup>7</sup> *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume Fifteen: December 11, 1778–August 31, 1782*, ed. David R. Chesnutt and C. James Taylor (Columbia: Published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 403.

<sup>8</sup> The motto is expressed in slightly different words throughout his papers. Early on he expressed it as *Optimum quod evenit*, or "Whatever happens, happens for the best." The earliest mention is in a July 10, 1747, letter to William Flower, who had been in the James Crockatt household when Laurens worked there. Laurens refers to it as "our Motto . . . (Optimum etc.)," which suggests that he may have adopted it from Crockatt or someone in the household. *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume One: Sept. 11, 1746–Oct. 31, 1755*, ed. Philip M. Hamer (Columbia: Published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 23.

insignificant events could unhinge him. His relationship with John Adams to which I alluded above is an example. It was usually chance or accident that he could accept and what he interpreted to be human failing that he could not. He had a direct manner that often made him appear to be on the verge of confrontation. To his credit, he did not challenge those who thought differently in politics or religion. His anger and sometimes-violent opposition was most often the response to what he believed to be dishonesty, laziness, or a failure to act honorably. Some of the early conflicts he had with royal authorities in South Carolina during the 1760s grew as much from the questionable behavior of the officials with whom he dealt, such as Edgerton Leigh, as from the British trade restrictions and revenue laws that many Americans found distasteful.<sup>9</sup> He could tolerate the placemen, who owed their positions to the connections they or their family maintained with powerful men in England, as long as they were competent and honest. Likewise during this turbulent era, Laurens also questioned the motives and honor of some of the leading patriots.<sup>10</sup>

Laurens was a man of action, not an intellectual. He was thoughtful and practical and applied his broad knowledge and experience to problems. His contributions to the revolutionary cause both in South Carolina and at the national level had little to do with the development of political theory or institutions. He did not move or inspire men to the cause by his speeches or writings. The few pamphlets he published were the result of his anger directed at men he believed to be dishonest or disingenuous. Laurens's published writings were above all devoted to defending his personal honor. What distinguished him from his contemporaries and elevated him to the top of any group of which he was a member, both in Charleston and Philadelphia, was his tireless energy and devotion to the cause. It was not his ideas, but his actions that made his reputation among his revolutionary contemporaries.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The pamphlet exchange he had with Leigh in 1769, recorded fully in volumes 6 and 7 of the *Laurens Papers*, is an excellent example of how principled legal disputes quickly descended in personal attacks.

<sup>10</sup> The list of famous patriots for whom Laurens had little or no respect was long and included Christopher Gadsden, John Hancock, Robert Morris, and anyone he believed saw the Revolution as a means to promote their individual interests.

<sup>11</sup> In 1779 James Lovell of Massachusetts, an acute observer of happenings in Congress, contrasted the work habits of Laurens and John Jay, his successor as president. Lovell informed Horatio Gates that he should not expect from Jay the timely response he had enjoyed when Laurens was president. "But your case is not singular; the Manners of the Man differ. One was flush of Pen & Ink the other quite the Reverse; one was with his Candle burning in the Morning almost thro the year, the other has a lovely Wife to amuse him in these Hours." *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Paul H. Smith (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1986), 13: 29.

With this brief background and basic understanding of this often-forgotten, and at best under-appreciated, founding father, let me discuss examples of the crises he met and surmounted as well as examples of the small irritations that plagued him and demonstrate his confrontational and often inflexible personality.

Laurens was born February 24, 1724, in Charleston. He died December 8, 1792, at the age of sixty-eight at his plantation north of Charleston, now Mepkin Abbey. I wish the necessary documentary material existed for investigating his formative years; however, we have only mere glimpses from which to surmise. One topic that I will not discuss here—and the one that is most often associated with Laurens in recent studies—is slavery and the slave trade. Students today begin their research by performing Internet searches; tracking Laurens by this method convinces you that other than his connection with slavery, he really was insignificant. One of the reasons that I will save the slavery question for later is that despite living with him for the last quarter-century, I have yet to make my final interpretive decision on that topic. Ironically, this may be the one area in which he made a significant theoretical contribution to southern revolutionary-era thought.

In Laurens's papers from his declining years, there is little discussion or reflection about his career choice, and certainly no regret. Despite his great diversity of interests, he was first and foremost a merchant. It appears that his father recognized his talents and helped him obtain a position in 1744 to train in London at the counting house of James Crokatt. Crokatt had resided in South Carolina before returning to England several years earlier. He was the most successful London merchant dealing in the Carolina trade.<sup>12</sup> In the eighteenth-century merchant world, a few years in Crokatt's firm, or one like it, was comparable to an M.B.A. from the finest business school today. To further that analogy, the instruction and practical learning Laurens received would be significant, but not more valuable, than the important connections he made. Within the first year he made a favorable enough impression to have some of his own clients and after two years conducted business with British merchants with whom he would retain trading ties for the next quarter-century.<sup>13</sup>

There was also, not unlike modern graduate schools, great competition among the young men training in Crokatt's business. By 1747 Laurens had proved himself and Crokatt offered him a partnership. Henry was determined to settle in London where he could best apply his skill and

<sup>12</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 1: 2.

<sup>13</sup> Among the merchants with whom Laurens maintained such a relationship were William Reeve and William Cowles of Bristol and John Knight of Liverpool. See *Papers of Henry Laurens*, volumes 1 through 8.

training. He had reason to believe that he was in a good position to take over Crokatt's entire business in a few years. His future appeared set.

In order to tie up some loose ends in South Carolina, Laurens sailed from England in April 1747 and arrived at Charleston on June 3. But the carefully constructed plans to make him a successful London merchant failed to be realized for reasons beyond his control. This is the first instance, and perhaps one of the best, for the application of his motto "Whatever is, is best." Three days before he landed in Charleston, Henry's father died. His mother had died five years before, and while he was a middle child, he was the older of two sons and charged with the settlement of his father's estate. This unforeseen obligation, added to his own business that he thought could be concluded in a few months, resulted in a lengthy stay in South Carolina. He did not return to London until December 1748, more than a year and a half later.

Despite Laurens's constant correspondence (he wrote his mentor at least fifty-three letters during the eighteen months he was gone) and earnest attempts to explain the difficulties that had kept him in South Carolina, Crokatt took on other men as his partners. Later, Laurens discovered that other young men jealous of his quick rise and favorable position with Crokatt had planted unflattering stories about him that may have undermined the promised partnership. This revelation came sometime after the fact and by then was of little consequence except to the perpetrator's conscience. (Given Laurens's intolerance of this type of failing, it is well that he did not know until later.)<sup>14</sup> When Laurens wrote to his stepmother about Crokatt's charges of cruelty and ingratitude, he assured her that he would compose an explanation for her and other friends to preserve his honor in the face of the charges. This document, if ever written—and I suspect it was—is not extant. Questioning Laurens's honesty, especially as a merchant, would certainly provoke him to put pen to paper.<sup>15</sup> By the time he returned to South Carolina in June 1749, he had traveled through England visiting Liverpool, Bristol, and other trading centers where he established significant and lasting business connections. And while he failed to enter a commercial

<sup>14</sup> Laurens recalled the incident in a March 4, 1774, letter he wrote from London to John Lewis Gervais. He described it as "one of the most fortunate Events in the History of my Commercial Life." He continued with satisfaction, "Some of them are Dead Some alive, but all Soon Saw their Error & were Mortified by Conviction of having been the Instruments of my prosperity." No doubt Richard Grubb and Alexander Watson, who became partners with James Crokatt at the time of Laurens's dismissal, were included among the culprits. *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume Nine: April 19, 1773–Dec. 12, 1774*, ed. George C. Rogers, Jr. and David R. Chesnut (Columbia: Published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, 1981), 336.

<sup>15</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 9: 179.



relationship with Crokatt, he joined in an extremely profitable trading partnership with English merchant George Austin.<sup>16</sup> Writing from London in 1749, he told his younger brother, James, that he would return to South Carolina, where "I shall pitch my tent."<sup>17</sup> The partnership with Austin and the experience he had gained set him on the road to become one of the wealthiest merchants in America. Within a year of returning to South Carolina he married into a prominent, landed family.<sup>18</sup>

The years he spent in London did more than just provide practical training. In 1749 he joked with his English-born stepmother about obtaining polish and sophistication from his time in London.<sup>19</sup> He probably was improved by the experience, but what is most significant for his leadership role in the Revolution is that it gave him an Atlantic perspective that most of America's revolutionary generation did not possess. By the time the British North American colonies were on the verge of independence, Laurens had been to England at least three times and had traveled extensively throughout the country. He had also traveled in France and Switzerland during the early 1770s. I believe the experience he gained abroad, both in the late 1740s as a young merchant and the early 1770s as a mature merchant, planter, and statesman, gave him a larger view—an Atlantic perspective that some of the other revolutionary leaders would gain in time, but did not possess when they set the course towards independence.

Laurens could exercise great patience and moderation. Some of the best examples of these qualities surfaced in 1775 when he held important executive positions in South Carolina's provincial government while the state was preparing to assert its independence. In June 1775, a month full of events significant both to Laurens and the state, he clearly rose to be the most influential man in South Carolina. On June 1, the same day that his brother sailed for England with Henry's two daughters, Laurens was elected president of the Provincial Congress.<sup>20</sup> During the next weeks he oversaw the creation of a South Carolina army and preparations for war. On June 14, when a special executive body called the Council of Safety was created, Laurens was predictably the choice as chairman. Despite the fear of

<sup>16</sup> Laurens anticipated some trouble with Crokatt and made a contingent arrangement with George Austin before sailing from Charleston in 1748. *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 1: 176, 178.

<sup>17</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 1: 178.

<sup>18</sup> Laurens married Eleanor Ball, daughter of Elias Ball, on June 25, 1750. *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 1: 241.

<sup>19</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 1: 181.

<sup>20</sup> *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume Ten: Dec. 12, 1774–Jan. 4, 1776*, ed. David R. Chesnut (Columbia: Published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 162.

British-inspired slave revolts and Indian uprisings on the frontier, Laurens remained remarkably cool.<sup>21</sup>

During the revolutionary furor in South Carolina of June and July 1775, Laurens insisted that individual rights not be sacrificed. Some of the more aggressive and radical revolutionaries advanced a loyalty oath that was called the Association. Laurens gave what I think is his most remarkable and admirable political statement in response to the Association. In the highly charged atmosphere following the news of Lexington and Concord and rumored British threats to South Carolina, anyone not clearly in the patriot camp was viewed with suspicion. As has been the case throughout American history, the struggle to preserve individual rights can become a losing cause when the perceived threat to the security of the state is great. As president of the Provincial Congress, Laurens signed the Association, but before doing so lectured that body on the coercive nature of the oath. He explained that some honest men who did not sign should be respected for the difficult position in which they had been placed by the dramatic circumstances. He counseled toleration in the face of extreme emotion. While he remained South Carolina's chief executive he pursued every opportunity to prepare the state for external and internal threats. But in the midst of the military and political crises, he did what he could to protect men whose conscience would not allow them to sign a loyalty oath.<sup>22</sup>

Cool, honorable, and admirable Henry Laurens displayed the type of measured authority and real leadership that made him the obvious choice as the state's executive at this critical time. Loyalists who benefited from his intervention later appeared to sign affidavits in his support when he was captured by the British and imprisoned in the Tower of London.<sup>23</sup> During the fall of 1775, however, this admirable, reasonable, and clear-thinking man fought a duel when he believed his honor was questioned. This eruption took place when more radical members of the revolutionary government opened letters from England addressed to men of uncertain loyalty. A complex series of events followed during which, despite Laurens's

<sup>21</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 10: 182.

<sup>22</sup> In a letter to his son John, Henry Laurens recalled his comments before he subscribed to the Association and concluded: "Gentlemen I meant to say in a few words, that I could not, I dared not promise to hold any Man an Enemy to the Colonies, if I knew him to be a friend\_\_merely because he would not at first asking subscribe the Association which I hold in my hand\_\_ I have proved what we all know that many Cases may exist, of refusal to sign this Paper by Men who are firm friends to our cause." *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 10: 172-179.

<sup>23</sup> Loyalists Peter Bachop and Lachlan McIntosh (of South Carolina) produced affidavits in 1781 concerning Laurens's fair treatment of loyalists while he held authority—or at least had influence—in South Carolina. *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 15: 363, 380, 433.

refusal to open sealed correspondence, he was accused of condoning the practice in a letter published in a Charleston newspaper by twenty-two-year-old John F. Grimké. Laurens replied to the accusation in a long, detailed letter to editor John Wells which accordingly was published as an extraordinary issue of the *S.C. General Gazette*. The letter ended with a warning that the young man would be wise to apologize rather than ruin his reputation and, finally, a challenge: "I have one word more to say, and it is impossible after such unprovoked insult, to avoid saying it. . . . Tell young Mr. Grimke, sir, that although it is true, I am an oldish man, and infirm, as he well knows, yet, if he will name his time, place and weapons, I will walk over the ground, at the very time, armed in proper sort, and if he dares to oppose my passage, he shall find that my age, though thrice his own, shall not protect him." In a postscript to the letter, Laurens underscored the point that he believed separated him from some of the most radical revolutionaries: "Love of Country," he wrote, was the excuse men who were "more of a patriot than a gentleman" employed to cover their deeds.<sup>24</sup> When he wrote to his daughter, sixteen-year-old Martha, who was residing in England at the time, about the unfortunate event, Laurens attempted to explain it in the most basic terms of right and wrong. One suspects that he may have worried what she thought of his unnecessary brush with death. He informed her that he was "ready to seal to the truth with my blood—not merely for my reputation but for the reputation of my children."<sup>25</sup> Earlier, I mentioned that I believed above all Henry Laurens was a merchant and that all of his subsequent accomplishments were indirectly products of his merchant training and experience. As a successful merchant, he had to act quickly and decisively or miss opportunities, so conversely he depended on the honest and timely actions of other merchants. The international and inter-colonial trade that he practiced was based on credit and trust. Timely and reliable information could not be overestimated in that world. This realm of trust and obligation was central to Henry Laurens's life. I believe his basic sense of honor was heightened by the realization that reputation was the most valuable commodity he or any merchant in that position could possess. In this light, it is understandable that anyone who questioned his honor or threatened his reputation was really challenging him on the most basic and essential level he could understand.

Congress made the right choice in late 1779 when it commissioned Laurens as its agent to the Netherlands to negotiate a desperately needed loan. As one of the preeminent traders in the Atlantic world, he knew and understood Dutch businessmen. Unfortunately for all concerned, his mission was interrupted when the British navy captured the vessel carrying him to

<sup>24</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 10: 458-467.

<sup>25</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 10: 483-484.

Amsterdam and imprisoned him in the Tower of London. John Adams, already in Europe, replaced him and, after some missteps (in part due to his lack of business savvy), was able to conclude a favorable loan and obtain Dutch recognition of the United States.

While he languished in the Tower, many old British friends visited and attempted to turn Laurens's loyalties. In the meantime, he heard almost nothing about American attempts to free him. Despite physical ailments exacerbated by his imprisonment and fears that his country had forgotten him, he remained steadfast. Laurens left the Tower after fifteen months and was named an American peace commissioner along with Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams.

During 1782 and 1783, Laurens worked to expand the treaty to include a commercial agreement with England that would be vital to the new independent nation. He was, in fact, in England trying to promote such an agreement when the definitive treaty was signed in September 1783. Despite the momentous work he attempted to accomplish during this period, and on the heels of one of the greatest personal tests of his life—his incarceration in the Tower—he again became embroiled in a question of honor and sidetracked from the more important diplomatic assignment.

Periodically, anonymous letters circulated condemning one or another of the American peace commissioners. John Adams appears to have been the easiest and most frequent target. His critical and prickly nature opened him to these attacks, and he often appeared jealous of the fame of the other diplomats and statesmen. Laurens received a copy of an anonymous letter in May 1782 that claimed among other things that Adams "laboured clandestinely in injuring F[ranklin] and L[ Laurens] to secure his situation."<sup>26</sup> Laurens thought this type of slander should be ignored, but became entangled in another issue of honor when Edmund Jenings, a man Adams had taken into his confidence, said and wrote some things that convinced Laurens that he was the anonymous letter writer. The ensuing flap resulted in an exchange of pamphlets that derailed Laurens again.

Knowing his extreme sense of honor, it is not difficult to imagine how Laurens must have exploded when he saw Jenings's first offering which was sarcastically entitled *The Candor of Henry Laurens*. The controversy was all but ignored by everyone except Laurens and Jenings, who reportedly came close to the dueling ground. Besides the brief tempest it caused for Franklin, Adams, and a few other people, the most significant result was, at least as far as Laurens was concerned, the end of his friendship with Adams.

<sup>26</sup> *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 15: 528; *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume Sixteen: September 1, 1782–December 17, 1792*, ed. David R. Chesnutt and C. James Taylor (Columbia: Published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 280-281.

Adams refused to accept the evidence Laurens presented and continued to associate with Jenings. Laurens believed that Adams had succumbed to Jenings's flattery—which quite likely is true.

Of greater significance than the disruption of the Adams-Laurens relationship was the fact that, while Laurens did attempt to convince British officials and merchants of the importance of good trade relations between the countries, he diverted much of his attention to the anonymous letter dispute. His accusation that John Adams contrived to exclude him from signing the final peace treaty seems weak when we consider that the signing took place on September 3, 1783—the same day Laurens published his pamphlet, *Mr. Laurens's True State of the Case. By Which His Candor to Mr. Edmund Jenings is Manifested, and The Tricks of Mr. Jenings are Detected*.<sup>27</sup> During one of the most important years in American history, during which the negotiations taking place in Paris and London might mean the success or failure of the revolutionary experiment, Laurens allowed a great deal of his time and energy to be consumed by a question of personal honor.

These are only a sample of numerous instances of what on the face of it appears to be erratic behavior on the part of Henry Laurens. Taken individually or out of the larger context of his life, they appear aberrational if not irrational. But he has been like a member of my family for twenty-five years, and I believe that I am beginning to understand him. He has his strengths and his weaknesses. I respect and enjoy his great accomplishments, while I try to be patient in understanding his human failings. One of the mysteries from the revolutionary era is how some reputations have remained intact over the centuries while others have been eclipsed. Laurens, among his contemporaries, stood in the first rank of the great founders, but his reputation faded. His extreme sense of honor that distracted him and diverted his efforts to insignificant issues may have been a factor in his failure to achieve the status he should have reached.

<sup>27</sup> Laurens's September 3, 1783, pamphlet *Mr. Laurens's True State of the Case. By Which His Candor to Mr. Edmund Jenings is Manifested and The Tricks of Mr. Jenings are Detected* is a reply and point-by-point refutation of Jenings's *The Candor of Henry Laurens* (London, July 1783). Jenings ended the exchange with his *A Full manifestation of what Mr. Henry Laurens Falsely Denominates Candor to Himself, and Tricks in Mr. Edmund Jenings*, published in late 1783. *Papers of Henry Laurens* 15: 277-333.

# GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EARLY ECONOMIC HISTORY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

PETER A. COCLANIS\*

**WHETHER ONE ASSOCIATES THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF** the South Carolina economy with state-of-the-art BMW plants or with shuttered textile mills, we know that the era of globalization is upon us. To South Carolinians of "a certain age," however, the internationalization of the Palmetto State did not begin with the fall of the Berlin Wall or the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., as some would have us believe, but with the governorship of John C. West. Holding office from 1971 to 1975, West worked tirelessly to lure foreign direct investment into South Carolina, enjoying a good deal of success, most notably with the recruitment of French tire giant Michelin into the state.<sup>1</sup> To people with longer memories, much of the credit in this regard should actually go to industrial recruiter Richard E. Tukey, who in the 1950s and 1960s laid the groundwork for South Carolina's later internationalization by convincing huge firms such as the German chemical company Hoechst to set up operations in the Palmetto State.<sup>2</sup> However one feels about West and Tukey, whatever one's position on free trade, offshore outsourcing, or "Benedict Arnold corporations," there is a tendency to view globalization, whether defined as a process or a condition, as a modern phenomenon. To paraphrase an old Sunday School line, "Globalization is unprecedented, this I know, for CNN's Lou Dobbs told me so."<sup>3</sup>

\* Peter A. Coclanis is associate provost for international affairs and Albert R. Newsome Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Paul Alongi, "Former Governor West Dies," *Greenville News* [Greenville, S.C.], March 21, 2004 (online edition); James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), pp. 189-190; Marko Maunula, "From Mill Town to Euroville: Economic Change and the Arrival of Foreign Corporations in Spartanburg, South Carolina," *Business and Economic History* 28 (Winter 1999): 145-152.

<sup>2</sup> On Tukey, see Maunula, "From Milltown to Euroville," pp. 146-148; Maunula, "Guten Tag Y'All: The Arrival of Foreign Corporations in Spartanburg County, 1960-1992" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004); Maunula, "Another Southern Paradox: The Arrival of Foreign Corporations—Change and Continuity in Spartanburg, South Carolina," in *Globalization and the American South*, ed. James C. Cobb and William Stueck (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), pp. 164-184, esp. pp. 169-170.

<sup>3</sup> Both on his CNN television program "Lou Dobbs Tonight" and in his recent book *Exporting America* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), journalist Lou Dobbs has

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